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## The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination

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included one or two sources for each entry so that readers who want more information may get a start.

This three-volume set, even when published in a paperback edition, costs sixty dollars, so those without a healthy interest in the frontier and West might pause and hope that their local library gets a set for their use.

*The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination*, by Robert Thacker. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989. x, 301 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$32.50 cloth.

REVIEWED BY JOHN R. MILTON, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH DAKOTA

Taking a clue from Canadian novelist and critic Robert Kroetsch, Robert Thacker states his intention as seeking to define and analyze the collision between old-world esthetics and literary conventions, on the one hand, and prairie landscape on the other. The first observers, and later the first literary figures, brought to the prairie a set of assumptions, esthetic and cultural, that colored their perceptions. Often, even on those occasions when they saw the landscape accurately, they couched their descriptions in language more appealing than the landscape, feeling that their readers might not believe the truth. Thacker also seeks to understand the relationship between the prairie landscape and fiction and to show that elements of prairie fiction have been derived from the land itself.

Because the prairie encompasses the middle third of the United States and Canada, and because Thacker begins his investigation with the sixteenth-century Spanish explorations in the Southwest, the book is erratic in its organization. Superficially, the discussions are ordered into three parts: visitors, pioneers, and inhabitants. The early explorers and travelers were from Europe as well as the settled part of the United States. The problem with all of them, in varying degrees, was their inability to perceive landscape freshly, avoiding pre-established assertions; primarily romantic, brought with them to a new land. Even so, the early accounts differ according to the part of the country being observed. Castañeda and Edwin James were more fully exposed to desert than to prairie, while Henry Brackenridge and Lewis and Clark viewed the prairie from the Missouri River. One result is that James was not prepared to find anything of significance and labeled the plains the Great American Desert, while Lewis and Clark were able to respond in traditional literary language only when they reached the mountains in Montana.

The difficulties are obvious. A new land demands a new language and style. Washington Irving's journals from his trip to Oklahoma in 1832 were fragmented and colorful, mere notes but interesting in their freshness. He then altered and expanded his journals to make certain that the book about his western travels would meet eastern literary standards. Francis Parkman, despite his Boston brahmanism, stayed closer to his journals and produced a book with a sense of immediacy and a troubling insight into the problems of the easterner describing the prairie. He found the valley of the Platte striking to the imagination even though he could see nothing that might be called beautiful or picturesque. Painters George Catlin, Karl Bodmer, Alfred Jacob Miller, and Canadian Paul Kane, although somewhat different from each other in style, nevertheless had the same difficulty in avoiding the romanticism of the times.

The section on pioneers chronicles the development of the prairie as setting in literary works, beginning with Cooper's *The Prairie* in 1827 and culminating in Cather's *O Pioneers!* in 1913, although Ole Rølvaag, the early Wallace Stegner, and Canadian Frederick Philip Grove continued the literary pioneering. Cooper was the first to make the landscape active, related directly to the characters as though causing them to act as they did. Cooper never saw the prairie, getting his information from travel books, but he made the landscape mythic and symbolic. Cather, on the other hand, knew the prairie intimately and could recreate it, not merely describe it. She dramatized what others had only observed.

The interim between Cooper and Cather is filled with writers who visited or lived on the prairie. Melville, writer of the sea, made a trip to Illinois; he was to find a strong parallel between ocean and prairie, as did Rølvaag later on. For Mark Twain, traveling from Missouri to Nevada Territory, as told in the first part of *Roughing It*, perception of prairie was ambivalent, with romanticism undercut by realism and humor. Owen Wister's *The Virginian* ends the era of romantic prairie fiction, according to Thacker, just after E. W. Howe (Missouri), Edward Eggleston (Indiana), Joseph Kirkland (Illinois), and Hamlin Garland (Wisconsin, Iowa, and South Dakota) injected varying amounts of realism into the prairie novel. Therefore, prairie landscapes in the nineteenth century were a battleground of romance and realism. (In a sense, this was true from the beginning of prairie observation and is still true in the late twentieth century, although realism has gained the upper hand.)

Part three, "Inhabitants," has one chapter, "A Complex of Possibilities: Prairie as Home Place," promising much and delivering little. Specific techniques to help writers adjust to the landscape are not

spelled out. However, several factors come to mind: recent writers are more familiar with the prairie and its images; they recognize the uniqueness and the beauties of a landscape of space; and they begin to find a language that describes the prairie meaningfully and helps bring some order to its apparent chaos. These generalizations could be applied to any region except for the limiting term *space*. It is space that Europeans could not find a language for, and it is space that contemporary writers, artists, historians, and psychologists must confront when challenged by prairie life and its consequences.

*The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America*, by Carl J. Guarneri. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991. xvi, 525 pp. Illustrations, tables, figures, maps, notes, appendix, bibliography, index. \$32.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY DANIEL WALKER HOWE, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

Fourierism, a form of utopian socialism, generally has not been regarded as a major force in nineteenth-century America. All the more surprising, then, that it should be the subject of a major book. Carl J. Guarneri tells an exciting story here, one that brings together high intellectual analysis and the social history of the common people. It is the story of the Frenchman Charles Fourier and his American disciples, of ideas that span the Atlantic and the prairies, linking Paris and New York with Iowa, Wisconsin, and Texas. No one, after reading this book, will ever look at nineteenth-century American society in quite the same way. And no informed student of American history will ever again patronize or dismiss the utopian socialists.

Charles Fourier (1772–1837) was heir to a distinguished tradition of thinkers who nurtured modern social science within the womb of moral philosophy. Like such eighteenth-century moral philosophers as Francis Hutcheson and Adam Smith, Fourier believed that human beings were dominated by their passions. Unlike most eighteenth-century thinkers, however, Fourier believed that the passions should be indulged rather than limited and controlled. He constructed a social science based on the principle that a rationally constructed community could satisfy the passions of each individual without danger to the others.

Fourier drew up detailed plans for model socialist communities called "phalanxes," which would provide every member with proper fulfillment in a context of harmonious labor. After his death, his vision of these phalanxes was carried on by his disciples in Europe

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